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ABSTRACT

Lave and Wenger (1991) reject individualistic and psychologistic theories of learning in favor of a more broadly social and contextual approach. They observe that all learning is situated not only in space and time, but also inextricably in relation to social practice. Learning is "legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice." Community of practice is a broad characterization that encompasses all social relations. Learning is an individual's ongoing negotiation with communities of practice, which ultimately gives definition to both self and that practice, whether it be in the context of training, literacy acquisition, community action, or graduate education. The "learning situated at the borders" metaphor describes a space and time of tremendous energy and potential. On the edge is where learning is most vital, most urgent, and creative. Adult education flourishes on the borders of countless communities, nurturing the seminal influence of newcomers, facilitating fuller participation in practice, and reinforcing shared decision making and control. When attention is given to the situation of learning, in the interaction between and among learners, their actions, and the world, ethical-normative issues become visible: the disempowering consequences of many training models, the anomalies of schooling as a vehicle for becoming a practitioner, and inconsistencies between practices of higher education and adult education. (YLB)

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Learning to Control Democratically Ethical Questions in Situated Adult Education

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This paper begins with a theoretical framework (situated learning) developed by Lave and Wenger and builds on its metaphorical content in order to bring several ethical issues into focus, among them: the disempowering consequences of many training models, the anomalies of schooling as a vehicle for becoming a practitioner, and inconsistencies between the practices of higher education and adult education.

For many reasons our definitions of the work of adult education are vague, general, and imprecise. However, communication requires us to be clearer, more precise, about the work that we do than we frequently are.

I begin with a definition of what I aspire to accomplish in my own work: Adult education is the art of implementing a social vision through the support, nurturance and inspiration of adult learning. A review of the content of our field of study as evidenced in the curriculum of our graduate programs shows great emphasis on support and nurturance (to a lesser degree inspiration) of adult learning, but very little attention to social vision.

Learning theory in American adult education has emphasized the individual, frequently without regard for the myriad ways in which individuals are shaped by and shape society. As a consequence, an abundance of instrumental knowledge about learning has been generated with little emphasis on the social and political context of learning. A narrow focus on individual learning, rather than on the situated nature of all learning, has enabled the field of adult education to cast its net widely, catching within it many educators and trainers who work toward diametrically opposed social purposes: from progressive educators seeking social change to technicians seeking to adapt learners in a rigged game of social immobility.

On the plus side, debate surrounding Jack Mezirow's Transformation Theory[1] has drawn attention to the influence of social factors on meaning schemes and perspectives. However, unresolved is the logic by which perspective transformation reconstructs not only the Lifeworld, but also lived social conditions. Mark Tennant urges blurring the boundaries between the psychological (individual) and the social, but needed is a theoretical framework which links the two.[2]

Ethical questions—what ought we to do?—are in almost every instance contextual, which is to say these questions are related to our vision of how we

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[1] *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. Jossey-Bass (San Francisco 1991).

[2] "Response to Understanding Transformation Theory," *Adult Education Quarterly*. 44:4 (Summer 1994).

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should relate to one another, how decisions affecting groups should be made, how political and economic power should be distributed. It is clear that even those educators who are disinclined to accept "social vision" as essential to their work, nonetheless have a social vision, expectations regarding the social organization of society and understandings of what constitutes social order.

Two metaphors related to learning and pedagogy have recently emerged which seem, in juxtaposition, to provide imagery for thinking more clearly about ethical issues related to our practice.

The first of these metaphors is derived from the theory of **situated learning**—a theory developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in their monograph entitled *Situated Learning*. The second is the metaphor of **border pedagogy** developed by Henry Giroux in his recent book, *Border Crossings* and in his somewhat more accessible text, *Living Dangerously*.

Situated Learning and Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger reject individualistic and psychologistic theories of learning in favor of a more broadly social and contextual approach.[3] They observe that all learning is situated not only in space and time, but also inextricably in relation to social practice. Learning, in their view, is "legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice."

"Community of practice" is a broad characterization which encompasses all social relations. Communities of practice can range from guilds, unions, collectives or federations of workers (adult educators, carpenters, ministers, soldiers) to broader cultural communities (street-wise youth, Republicans, upper-class Londoners). In each instance, a community of practice represents a negotiated set of relations among persons, their actions, and the world over time and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.[4]

The complexity of each person is described in reference to relationships within multiple communities of practice. Adult educator, citizen, parent, political activist and other descriptors point to these relationships and comprise in total the complex identity of each individual. The structures of communities in which each of us participates set terms for our legitimate participation (licensure, apprenticeship, lifestyle conformities) and define and limit our possibilities for learning. These communities of practice provide an essential context for the social production of knowledge, as well as interpretative frames necessary for our making sense of the world. Knowledge and the world are mutually and dynamically constitutive. Learning is an individual's ongoing negotiation with communities of practice which ultimately gives definition to both self and that practice.

In this framework, all learning is apprenticeship. For a child, learning is apprenticeship in an adult community. For a worker, learning is apprenticeship in a trade or craft. For a graduate student, learning is an apprenticeship in the academy. For each of us, learning is legitimate peripheral participation in a

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[3] *Situated Learning*. Cambridge University Press (New York 1991).

[4] for example, see Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave (eds.), *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*. Cambridge University Press (New York 1993).

community of practice, whether it be in the context of training, literacy acquisition, community action or graduate education.

For Lave and Wenger, "legitimate peripheral participation" is an integral concept. All participation is peripheral and legitimate, but each term contributes a nuance to the meaning of a holistic concept. Legitimate points to the fluid, amebic, but nonetheless defined borders which separate "inside" from "outside." We can only join in the discourse, and thus learn, from within the community in which the discourse takes place and has meaning.

To participate on the periphery is, first, to recognize that there is no center, no magnetic core from which relations within communities of practice are defined and, second to emphasize the dynamic and at times chaotic energy which is experienced "on the edge,"—where the frenzy of transformative learning is more likely to occur.

Finally, all learning is participation—absorbing and being absorbed in the culture of practice, while at the same time acquiring both the competence and will to share in decisions which define that culture. Our participation can be either centripetal or centrifugal. Centripetal participation moves us inward toward more intensive participation so that our learning and work influences and becomes constitutive elements in the definition of the community. Such participation (learning) is empowering. On the other hand, centrifugal participation moves us outward, keeps us on the periphery, prevents us from participating more fully and is thus disempowering.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation as Metaphor

While the theoretical framework developed by Lave and Wenger reflects the relativizing character of postmodernism, nonetheless as metaphor the image of peripheral participation in multiple, overlapping communities provides imagry for describing the contested nature of all learning. Because of its emphasis on participation the metaphor is wholly consistent with claims about the relational and socially-produced character of knowledge. As metaphor, it is also consistent with claims about the negotiated character of meaning and provides a basis for identification of adult education with a lifelong process of negotiation. Finally, it supports the dilemma-driven, engaged nature of all learning—the notion that we learn when we perceive relevance, when the object of our learning engages us and demands our attention—and we do not learn when we are otherwise engaged.

Warfare at the Border

While the theory of situated learning acknowledges that learning on the edges can be disempowering, decentering, and dehumanizing, its postmodern frame lacks conceptual tools for understanding the tumultuous warfare that frequently characterizes life on the periphery.

There is conflict across borders, especially where communities of practice lay claim to the same land—as, for example, in the intersection of training and adult education. Additionally, there is conflict within communities of practice as various constituencies compete on an unequal field for power. There are contradictions embedded in self-definitions and learning is always compromised by multiple influences from both within and without the diverse and competing communities to which each of us belongs.

Henry Giroux directly problematizes these conflicts in his study of how culture is produced and reproduced in the midst of asymmetrical relations of power. He elaborates a strategy of border pedagogy which embodies an ideal for adult education practice and a corrective for the deficiencies of situated learning theory. The question here is for adult educators to first recognize that the most intensive and potentially productive adult learning is situated on the edges of communities of practice—at contested sites subject to the competing claims of intersecting communities. In a word, most adult education is situated in the midst of struggle. Education can conceal or reveal that struggle. If the former, it represents an act of aggression against the learner, denies access to critical understandings which could provide a basis for informed decision and action.

On the other hand, a border pedagogy reveals the struggle at the edge not only by acknowledging the shifting borders that both undermine and reterritorialize divergent communities of practice, but also by linking adult education with a more substantive struggle for a democratic society. With John Dewey, Giroux argues that the central aim of education is to acquire knowledge and skill necessary for "reasoned participation in democratically organized publics." The aim of learning on the edge is in each instance to become more fully involved in inventing the discourse which defines the field.

Demystification becomes a central task in a border pedagogy. Adult learners, whether in workplace training or in graduate studies in adult education, can be—should be—encouraged to cross ideological and political borders as a way of expanding the limits of their own understanding and broadening the scope of their ability to influence and shape decisions affecting their day-to-day life. The aim of a border pedagogy is to enhance the agency of learners, enabling them to produce and not merely absorb knowledge. This notion of pedagogy is "predicated on a notion of learned hope, forged amidst the realization of risks, and steeped in a commitment to transforming public culture and life."

Toward Ethical Discourse

The juxtaposed images associated with the theory of situated learning and a border pedagogy provide a basis for addressing critical, ethical and normative issues in adult education. As noted above, a narrow focus on individual—in-the-head images of learning—separates learning from its social contents, both the social relations which are reproduced in us and the transformative consequences of our learning on society. Learning, divorced from its situated context, is instrumentally identified as of positive value. All learning is "good," in this limited view, and all effective pedagogical mechanisms for its nurture are to be encouraged. It is only when we attend to the situation of learning, in the interaction between and among learners, their actions, and the world, that ethical-normative issues become visible and that normative discourse becomes possible.

The Empowering and Disempowering Consequences of Training

Learning should lead from peripheral to fuller participation—strengthening our influence and decision-making power within a given community of practice. Structures for peripheral participation—one of which is workplace education and training—may, on the other hand, serve to keep learners on the edges, reinforcing

the dominance of old timers in a field over the encroaching aspirations of newcomers.

Work-related training can be limited to the transmission of technical and instrumental knowledge which keeps a worker "current" and maintains a workers position on the periphery.[5] Workers often struggle to maintain their peripheral status, having to run faster and learn more in order to stand still. Opportunities for apprenticeship can, in actuality, be a form of cheap labor which exploits workers under the pretext of continuing their education.

Often we are over-determined and oppressed by jobs. It is easy for our potential for learning to be constrained in the name of efficiency and productivity, but such constraints are illusory. Our productivity increases in direct proportion to our vested interest in the outcomes of our work. Maintenance of control at the core may be an aim of corporate leaders, but it is not in any way in the interest of those on the periphery whose loss of control and powerlessness inevitably diminishes their potential to contribute to production.

For those on the edges, the workplace remains potentially a primary site for learning and personal development. Adult education in relation to work should be transformative. It should infuse training with critical reflection on work at the periphery. It should problematize work experience, encourage collective solutions to problems of production, management and work conditions, and contextualize workplace problem-solving in relation to broader local, national and global communities of practice. The immediate aim of workplace adult education should be to enhance the participation and influence of worker/learners in their workplace, but beyond this, adult education should facilitate the expansion of workers' otherwise narrow sphere of influence and concern.

The Anomalies of Schooling

Schooling in general, and career-oriented graduate programs in particular, are predicated on claims that knowledge and learning can be decontextualized. Schools routinely sequester learners from other communities of practice, and to some extent prevent students from peripheral participation in communities of culture and work. Nonetheless, schools are themselves communities of practice, constituted by quite specific contextual elements. Without doubt, learning can take place where there is teaching, but intentional instruction is not in and of itself the principal source or cause of learning. Learning occurs, in relation to what is taught, only when two situational conditions are met:

- what is taught illuminates experience within communities of practice, and
- the meaning ascribed to what is taught captures a way of acting or a way of being which allows the learner to participate more fully in a community of practice.

Within the limits of these conditions, what is learned is always problematic in relation to what is taught.[6] Certainly, learning how to "do" school appropriately and expeditiously is a major part of what school teaches. Which is to say that in the context of schooling, we are all legitimate peripheral participants in a community of

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[5] cf Mechthild Hart, *Working and Educating for Life.* Routledge (New York 1992).

[6] Lave and Wenger, op. cit.

practice which is the school itself. The borders of this community might overlap other communities of practice—and specifically the communities of practice toward which teaching is directed. The borders of school and the borders of other practices are not coterminous and the motion from school to the Workworld or the Lifeworld is always problematic.

Since the 1940s, one mechanism for legitimizing peripheral participation within communities of professional practice has been the development of graduate programs within higher education. In adult education, as in other fields, normative concerns have focused on developing a field of study—a canon of prescribed and largely instrumental knowledge relevant to discourse within the community of practice. Practical knowledge—both theories and methods to live by—is not so much ignored, as problematic within the context of schooling. Practical knowledge may or may not be directly addressed in the curriculum, but the acquisition of practical knowledge ultimately depends on learning situated elsewhere—in the context of actual practice.

This suggests avenues for exploration, especially among adult educators who have a vested interest in learning on the edges and special insight into the processes which promote fuller participation in communities of practice. Graduate programs in adult education should not be promoted as the "port of entry" for persons seeking to participate in the work of adult education, but rather as supportive forums for critical reflection on work already begun. Unfortunately, actively promoting and sustaining learning on the borders of work and citizenship is a form of peripheral participation sometimes dismissed as entering the field by the "back door." Such work represents, in fact, the front door through which most of us have passed.

Higher and Adult Education

The anomaly of using higher education as a vehicle for transmitting the culture of adult education becomes apparent when we attend to imbedded contradictions in these two divergent communities of practice. Of course the effort is generally made to inform higher education with a pedagogy more consistent with adult education, but the tension remains in the imposition of standards appropriate to a university, but questionable in relation to the practice of adult education. Practices appropriate within the culture of the university—grading, prescribing the content of learning, definitively arbitrating success or failure, devaluing experiential learning, promoting competitive models of learning—impose conditions for legitimacy which are inconsistent with self-defined principles of adult education, i.e. principles which have emerged in discourse within the community of practice.

To what extent has higher education, as guardian of legitimacy at our portals, reshaped and redefined adult education practice? Without question, much adult education has become more like schooling and in many instances is now school-based. Are we not more likely now to accept as adult education practice programming which mandates learner acquiescence and obstructs learner self-direction, training which reproduces hierarchical and oppressive relations in the workplace, and teaching which imparts to individuals decontextualized, basic linguistic and computational skills as a solution to their social problems?

Adult education might be unique among fields of study within the university in that its cultural legacy and mission (facilitating peripheral participation) includes tools for critical reflection on education as it relates to learning. Graduate students of adult education can be reflective critics of their own situated learning within the

university, and not merely apprentices of an academic culture. Attention to the contradictions between higher and adult education should be a thread woven throughout a post-secondary, adult education curriculum.

Afterword

I return to the definition with which I began. Social vision and the political goals which derive from that vision are central to adult education discourse. Ironically, our field of study which first lamented and then later denied its marginality is actually and thoroughly focused on the margins. Peripherality enters into the definition of our practice and permeates our self-understanding. The "learning situated at the borders" metaphor describes a space and time of tremendous energy and potential. On the edge is where learning is most vital, most urgent and creative. Without doubt, on the edge is where adult education not only finds its greatest challenge, but where adult educators are most likely to be engaged in their practice. The image of working "on the edge" suggests a new meaning for "marginality"—an interpretation more positive and affirming of the social purpose and vision of adult education.

Adult education flourishes on the borders of countless communities, nurturing the seminal influence of newcomers, facilitating fuller and fuller participation in practice, and reinforcing shared decision-making and control. At its finest and most empowering, adult education is about the business of building democracy in communities of practice.

At the same time, adult education is a community of practice in its own right. It maintains borders with more or less rigidity, legitimizes certain ways of learning in relation to participation, and prescribes forms of discourse consistent with its self-proclaimed principles. But in an overarching way, adult education is permeated with marginality derived from its mission to work on the edges, peripheral to all cultures and practices—superimposing a process of respectful discourse leading to responsible action on every community of practice, including itself.